BLIND DEVOTION

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BY WALTER DAVENPORT

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Copy one

Blind and crippled, yes—but handicapped? No! In them, Admiral Vickery saw "American spirit at its best and American workers at their finest"

THE Peeper let on that he was working on something big. If, said the Peeper to a bunch of young Navy squirts who were trying to grow convoy beards, if it wasn't for what he was doing, maybe they wouldn't be sleeping good.

Of course, these young Navy squirts, most of them being from somewhere west of the Bronx, could see that the Peeper was all but black blind. Actually, he is industrially blind, having ten per cent normal sight—and that much going fast.

When they asked the Peeper what he was working on, this something without which maybe they wouldn't sleep good, he merely gave them a high, fast bawl on the art of piping down about military secrets and bought them a beer to take the edge off his words. He grabbed the lapel of his coat, shoved it toward the sound of their young voices, bade them look and read. And the vague forms, blurred and shapeless in his all-but-dead eyes, closed in to look at the button on his coat—an eagle and a star and the words "Award of Merit . . . Maritime Commission."

Well, the Peeper said he had to be shoving off. One of the kid sailors said, "Okay, Shipmate," and off the Peeper ambled with that defiant, heavy-footed half-amble that blind men use. He was grinning, too. Something big. Sheets and pillowcases and deck swabs. Something big, so's they could sleep good. So the Peeper, feeling that he had put something over on the kids, grinned. They'd be thinking of submarine detectors, bomb sights, electric safety gadgets—things like that.

Charity Not Wanted

Hesitating now and then when his extra compensating senses rang their alarms, he threaded the crowds and the hooting traffic until he was at the door of an ugly, beetle-browed building on Adams Street, Brooklyn. Over the door was the melancholy name of the place: The Sheltered Workshops of the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor. It's an ancient, honorable and depressing name, with tears in every syllable, proclaiming the ugly word charity, which neither the Peeper nor any of the hundred and seventy-five blind men and women within want. Perhaps some day it will be changed to catch up with the times and facts. But never mind that.

Above the misnomer, a blue pennant flaps in the gusts that blurt down the street. It notifies the world that these fellow workers of the Peeper have earned it from the United States Maritime Commission for the quantity and excellence of the contribution they've made to winning the war. A gold star on the blue bunting notifies you that what these handicapped people have done is matched with what they have continued to do. And before this wholly inadequate tale is in your hands, the Maritime Commission will have added another gold star, which will mean that they're doing it even better.

On these four floors, a varying number of your fellow citizens have, since Pearl Harbor, turned out three million pillowcases and more than a million bed sheets for the Merchant Marine and the United States Navy, chiefly for the former. When we got there, in the wake of the Peeper, there were about 250 men and women at the looms, the benches, the machines. Three quarters of them are blind. The other quarter are what conventional industry calls unemployables—polios, hunchbacks, one-armed, one-legged, armless, legless, grotesquely twisted bodies, semi-paralytics, men and women with malformed hands, deaf-mutes; and there's one fellow who's deaf, dumb and blind.

They travel as much as ten miles to get to work. They'll buck the toughest subway lines to get there and home again. Absenteeism is almost unknown, not because they fear the wrath of their foremen but because they dread the scorn of their fellows. What do you think we are, hey? Regular people? Late reporting for work? Well, when the snow is too deep, the streets too icy, they can't travel as fast as you can. Crutches are treacherous on the ice. The gales and the flying snow deceive the blind. But their work cards show attendance records that give Phil Murray's, John Lewis' and Bill Green's boys something to laugh off—if they can.

No Special Case Here

As workers, they are regarded by the government with neither more nor less favor than any other persons in war industry. Their work is subjected to the same inspection standards. The AICP is a nonprofit organization. What is not paid out in wages goes back into new or additional or improved machinery. Workers are paid a basic hourly rate during their training period. That completed in, say, two weeks, the worker goes on a piecework basis.

We talked to a blind woman at a sewing machine, who had just drawn down seventy-five dollars for the preceding week, and to a man whose legs were utterly dead (infantile paralysis), who had been paid seventy. However, the average weekly pay is about thirty-six dollars. A somewhat more lively statistic is that the Peeper and his fellow workers are buying more than five thousand dollars' worth of War Bonds every month.

This sort of thing has been going on in Adams Street since before Pearl Harbor. In June, 1938, it became the law of the United States that certain things needed by the government, and which could be made by the blind and other industrially handicapped, should be bought from Sheltered Workshops; mops, for example, and sheets and pillowcases. That was the Wagner-O'Day Act. At the head of the shops for the handicapped of the Brooklyn AICP was Mr. Edward S. Molyneaux, himself almost blind. It was—and still is—Mr. Molyneaux's conviction that if you wish to do the handicapped (and the blind in particular) a major disservice, you'll coddle them, wait on them, weepishly run their lives for them, until they have lost all initiative and all their will to help themselves.

Mr. Molyneaux went to Washington, took his even chance with hordes of physically normal industrialists who were fighting for government contracts, and he returned with work to do. But it was not until after we had got into the war that the first husky order arrived in Adams Street—2,300,000 pillowcases. The blind

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PETER MARTIN

Mrs. Julia Geohegan, though blind for many years, threads a sewing machine as easily, and operates it as efficiently, as you could, using both eyes

IRVING KAUFMAN

Ruth Williams, personnel director of the Brooklyn AICP, receives the "M" pennant presented to the Sheltered Workshops by Admiral Vickery

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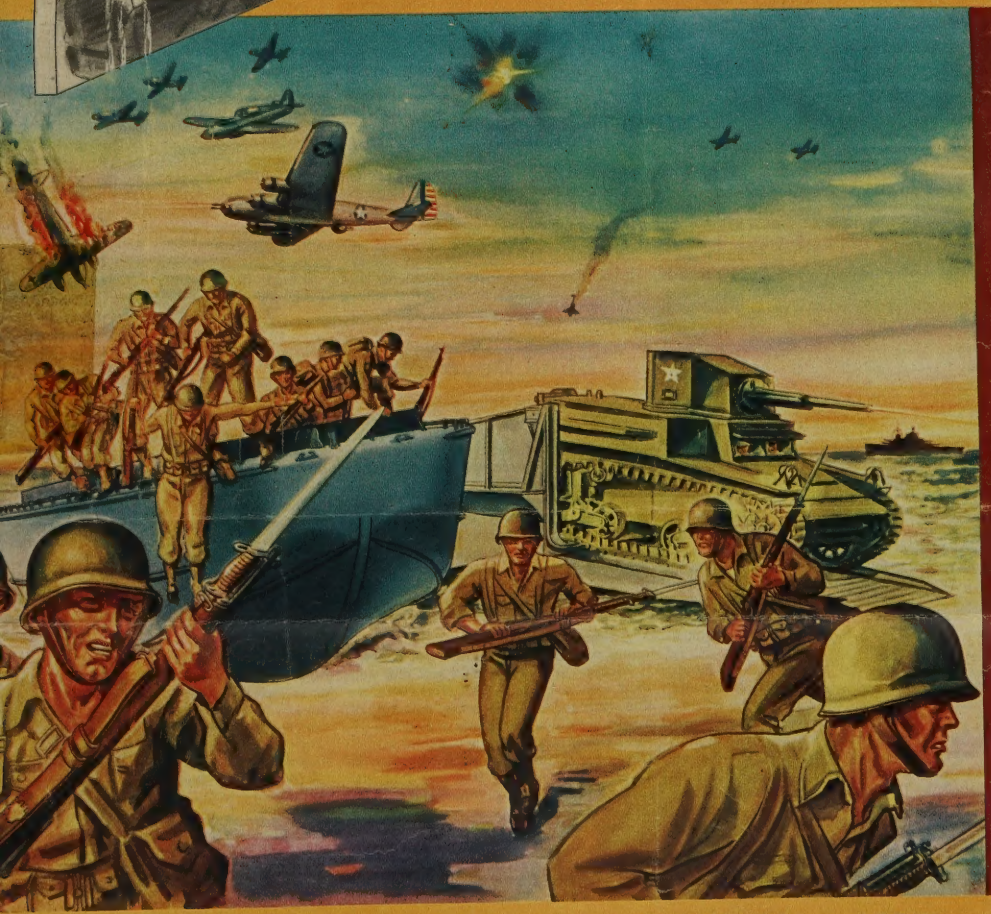

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